



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on National Minorities

As prepared for delivery by Mr. Gavin Helf, Public Member, U.S. Delegation
Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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Like many other delegations, the United States wishes to commend the quiet but effective work of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, Ralf Ekeus. By working to protect the rights of national minorities, Ambassador Ekeus truly is helping some of the most vulnerable segments of our societies. We believe that the High Commissioner's efforts deserve the full backing of all participating States.

The United States particularly welcomes Ambassador Ekeus' recent emphasis on minority education issues. Even in the most democratic states, promoting educational opportunities for national minorities can prove challenging. However, providing minority groups with the skills they need for social and political equality while continuing to promote their unique cultural heritage represents an investment in a brighter future. Ongoing HCNM projects in southeastern Europe and those planned for Georgia and Kyrgyzstan are contributing to the resolution of some of these countries' most sensitive problems.

Unfortunately, there are still numerous cases in the OSCE region where the educational rights of national minorities are not being protected. We recall the commitment made in Copenhagen in 1990 to "endeavor to ensure that persons belonging to national minorities, notwithstanding the need to learn the official language or languages of the State concerned, have adequate opportunities for instruction of their mother tongue or in their mother tongue, as well as, wherever possible and necessary, for its use before public authorities in conformity with applicable national legislation." The closure of a Moldovan language school in Tiraspol in July, just one day after the High Commissioner visited the school, and subsequent actions against other Moldovan schools under Transnistrian control provide particular cause for concern.

Prohibitions against the use of minority languages are also a problem in Turkmenistan, where the obligatory use of Turkmen as the official language is limiting Russian and Uzbek minorities' access to education in their mother tongues. We call on the Turkmen authorities to follow through on their pledge to work with Commissioner Ekeus and to uphold OSCE commitments on minority rights.

The plight of minorities remains a concern as well in southeastern Europe, particularly in Kosovo. The March violence, which primarily targeted Kosovo's minorities, resulted in damage to or destruction of more than 900 homes and 30 churches and monasteries. While Kosovo has made notable progress in rebuilding the homes, individuals affected by the March riots are only slowly returning to their homes and ethnic relations in Kosovo remain tenuous. Despite the March setback, the international community and many in Kosovo remain committed to creating a democratic, multi-ethnic society where all -- regardless of race or religion - are free to live and move about. To reach this goal, the U.S. will continue to work with its international partners and the PISG to implement the "Standards for Kosovo,"

particularly those related to the protection of minority communities as Kosovo prepares for the mid-2005 Review Date.

The situation for the Serb minority in Croatia also remains a concern, but is improving. While the political will to address minority questions is evident at senior political levels, local Croat leaders need to do more to welcome Serb returnees. Hopefully, the government's commitments on refugee returns will lead to the resolution of all outstanding obstacles, including property restitution and occupancy/tenancy rights, and will encourage those who resist returns at the local level to be more cooperative. Better implementation of laws protecting the rights of national minorities and an increased minority representation in Croatia's civil service and law enforcement bodies will also help ensure that returns are sustainable.

Finally, the United States is concerned about the worsening plight of minorities in Vojvodina, Serbia. Although Vojvodina has previously been a well-known treasure of multi-ethnic accommodation and respect for diversity, this year there have been several disturbing assaults against Hungarian and other non-Serb inhabitants of Vojvodina, and minority cemeteries have been desecrated and property vandalized. Confronting such criminal activity can be challenging for political leaders, but authorities must send a strong, public message that such behavior is unacceptable. The United States urges Serbian officials to condemn the incidents in Vojvodina strongly and unequivocally and to demonstrate support for the victims. Local police also need to be pushed to prosecute those responsible and deter future incidents.

Notwithstanding the significant improvement in the plight of national minorities in the OSCE area over the last few years, much more remains to be done. The United States sincerely hopes that national minorities throughout the OSCE area will soon be able to take advantage of their "right to exercise fully and effectively their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law."